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AUTHORITARIANISM VERSUS WELFARE POLICY: THE TWO FACES OF THE BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION

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Abstract:

Since Hugo Chávez's rise to the presidency, Venezuela has become a deeply divided country. The ensuing polarization has expressed in violent forms of political fanaticism; in the partisan fracture of many professional and labor associations, of the army, in open warfare between private and public media outlets; in the weakening of the private sector of the economy and, overall, in the erosion of sociability. The present article seeks to explain the causes of such a high degree of polarization. It departs from two main hypotheses: First, the Bolivarian Revolution reveals two distinct faces: an authoritarian face and a welfare face. Second, the coexistence of these two faces accounts for the high degree of political polarization. The article concludes by arguing that the contrasting perspectives Venezuelans hold in relation to the Bolivarian Revolution are closely associated to their divergent views regarding the meaning and practice of democracy.

Key words: Venezuela, political polarization, Hugo Chavez, authoritarianism, welfare policy.

INTRODUCTION

Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian revolution has provoked strong reactions –for and against– within and without Venezuela. On the domestic front, the revolution has implied a high degree of political polarization, which has been expressed in many episodes of mass political mobilization and violence. On the International front the

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revolution has received its share of attention from heads of state and governments, scholars, political and social activists, and television and newspaper outlets. It would be accurate to say that the revolution has had a galvanizing effect upon international public opinion, too.

The article's first premise is that the Bolivarian revolution comprises two markedly distinct faces: a political face that is very much tainted by authoritarian practices and disregard for the democratic process, and a second one marked by the government's attempts at promoting welfare among the most vulnerable sectors of the population. These contrasting faces, it is further argued, are able to account for the high levels of conflict existing around president Chávez's government. At the center of the political conflict stand two diametrically opposed views about the meaning and practice of democracy among Venezuelans of different class extraction.

The political events leading to the inauguration of the Chávez regime and its socially divisive policies are many and complex. They follow a long and twisting path from the fall of the M. P. Jimenez's dictatorship in 1958 and the conformation of the Punto Fijo Pact; to the explosion of oil prices throughout the 1970s; to the debt crisis and the devaluation of the Venezuelan currency of the early 1980s; to the efforts to 'democratize the democracy' of the late 1980s (Crisp and Levine, 1998); to president C. A. Pérez's 1989 attempt to liberalize the economy and the ensuing popular uprising known as the Caracazo, and two failed military coups in 1992 (Lander, 1996; Cedeño, 2006); to C. A. Pérez's impeachment later in the same year (Corrales, 2002; Valenzuela, 2004); and finally to the complete disintegration of the traditional party system in the presidential election of 1993 (Dietz and Mayers, 2007). In this 1993 election R. Caldera, founder of COPEI, left the organization and founded a small party called Convergencia, which won the election with 30.46 percent of the vote (Landman, 1993). Caldera's second term turned out to be extremely unsuccessful. The final legacy of his administration was a devaluation of the national currency by 70 per cent, an interest rate of 69 per

cent, a huge capital flight, and the highest poverty levels seen in Venezuelan modern history (Maingon, 2004; De Venanzi, 2006). Given this convergence of adverse events, it should not come as a surprise that the population was willing to experiment with different political alternatives (Mainwaring, 2006). Thus, in December 1998, Hugo Chávez, an outsider to the political system, was elected president of Venezuela with 56.20 per cent of the ballot.

Of crucial relevance to the process eroding the Venezuelan traditional democratic system is the founding in 1982, of a conspiratorial group led by Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez –The Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (MBR200)– that aimed to capture political power by force (Norden, 1996). The 1992 coups perpetrated by this group failed, yet they were able to undermine the foundations of the political system's capacity to govern (Myers and O'Connor, 1998). It is worth noting that since its inception the MBR 200 established close links with civilians who had fought in the guerrilla movement of the 1960s. The alliances with civilians further extended after the failed coups to include groups of intellectuals, journalists, and leftist political activists, thus becoming an example of what Payne (2000) terms uncivil movements: in short, civilian-military coalitions that disproportionately and illegitimately affect the conduct of the state. It is the uncivil nature of the group now governing Venezuela where we can locate the authoritarian roots of the Chávez regime. Of equal importance in understanding the nature of the current Venezuelan government is by comprehending the ways in which the social concerns of the MBR 200 have expressed under Chávez's presidency.

Section one of this article explores the authoritarian face of president Chávez's government. It points to the uncivil nature of the movement that originally brought Chávez to the attention of the public: the MBR 200. A second theme is that of the authoritarian style of government imposed by president Chávez and the Movimiento V República, characterized by a strong hold on all branches of the state and a high degree of intolerance toward po-

litical opponents. The section attempts to show that under Chávez's presidency, Venezuela's regime has moved toward what Carothers (2002), terms a dominant power politics system: a regime that seems to adhere to standard democratic practices but which is eager to abuse power.

Section two deals with the welfare face of the regime: it offers an analysis of the most important social policies and programs implemented by president Chávez's government. The section is not intended as an exercise in program evaluation (a task that would require a complete article in itself), but simply aims to describe the nature of these programs and their impact upon selected social and demographic indicators.

Section three explores the extent to which the authoritarian and welfare faces of the Chávez regime are able to account for the high degree of political polarization affecting Venezuela. This section aims to reveal that although previous analyses of such polarization have shown important dimensions of the Venezuelan political process (Gott, 2000; Corrales, 2005; Cedeño, 2006; Cannon, 2008; Heath, 2009) they also tend to ignore crucial aspects of the problem. The section will argue that for a more complex analysis of the factors stirring political polarization in Venezuela, related to contrasting meanings Venezuelans attach to the meaning and practice of democracy.

The conclusion summarizes my findings and makes the case for the need of some degree of consensus between detractors and followers of president Chávez. If his regime were to build in the respect for democratic freedoms as well as strengthen and institutionalize the significant government's efforts at fighting poverty and

social exclusion, the existing polarization and violence are likely to fade².

THE VENEZUELAN ROAD TO AUTHORITARIANISM

Carothers (2002) has provided two useful concepts with which to describe the nature of the political regimes emerging from the third-wave democratization, but which also can be used to classify democratic regimes in most developing countries. He postulates that the worldwide drive toward democratization has come to a halt, bringing on political regimes that stand somewhere within a political grey zone between dictatorship and democracy. Yet there are differences among these quasi-democratic states. Carothers uses the term feckless pluralism to denote regimes characterized by ample political liberties, but with little political participation beyond voting, and where political parties are perceived by the population to be corrupt, self-interested, and inefficient in solving the nations' most important problems. A second group of countries is trapped within what Carothers terms dominant-power politics. In this case we have regimes with some basic forms of democracy. Nonetheless, one leader, political party, or family dominates the system in such a manner that there are few prospects of alternations in power. Moreover, the lines between the state and the ruling party become blurred, giving way to ominous forms of corruption. Elections are dubious but not outright fraudulent. Existing opposition parties are so excluded from the power system that they become weak and lose credibility. Hence the oppositional role is played by civic groups, NGOs, and by the independent media.

This article contends that under president Chávez we are witnessing the case of a country with a long-standing democracy, albeit of the feckless pluralist type, move toward the dominant-power

² The concern with extreme polarization is rooted in A. Valenzuela's (1978) thesis that countries experiencing a high degree of political conflict may also experience the breakdown of their democratic systems.

politics model. I will point to issues such as the remarkable concentration of power in the executive branch of the state; the strong tendency to pass key legislation by presidential decree; the populist style employed by the president; the use of state violence against opponents, and finally to the attempt by president Chavez at constructing a unified social order of a strong personal nature. Indeed, some observers of the Venezuelan situation contend that the Chávez regime is decidedly less open and pluralistic than its predecessors (McCoy and Myers, 2004).

In the author's view, the Venezuelan transition to the annotated dominant-power politics model is strongly associated with the uncivil nature (Payne, 2000) of the movement that originally brought Chávez to the attention of the nation: the *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200*. The arrival of this uncivil movement to power in 1999 explains not only the intolerance of the Chávez regime toward its opponents, but also the nature of the recurring themes present in the discourse of the Bolivarian revolution.

Payne (2000) coined the concept of uncivil movement to refer to movements that forge civic-military coalitions of uncertain ideological content—generally a right-wing diffuse ideology—which tends to disproportionately and illegitimately influence the conduct of the state. Payne mentions in passing that Chávez's movement may constitute the first left-wing uncivil movement in Latin America. The MBR 200 started as an alliance of various junior officers led by Chávez as far back as 1982, and aspired to gain political power. The MBR 200 movement had a broad perspective on what should be done to take care of Venezuela's multiple troubles. At first, they were concerned with the ethical degradation of the preceding Venezuelan governments. The members of the MBR-200 considered that the state should build a more just and equitable society, and should also fight the high levels of poverty which, in their view, were mostly the result of administrative corruption, the plundering of the treasury, and the weight of external debt. But there were less altruistic causes, too. Venezuela's economic crisis had also

reached the military: officers and troops were poorly paid; the institution was under-funded and under-equipped. The MBR-200 committed itself to forging a civilian-military movement whose magnitude was clearly exposed during the second military coup of 1992. The fusion of the MBR 200 and their civil counterparts was formalized in October 1997 with the foundation of the Movimiento V Republica (Canache, 2002).

Since its beginnings, the Chávez government has revealed a very strong tendency to concentrate all power in the executive branch (Marquez, 2004), and to appoint a large number of military officers to staff non-military posts in government (Roland and Danopoulos, 2003). According to Sanchez (2008: 325), Chavez's years in office have been 'marked by executive encroachment and control over all manner of state institutions, a steady erosion of institutional checks and balances upon executive power, and, ultimately, a withering away of democratic governance'. Such concentration of power was made possible by the high ballot obtained by the Movimiento V Republica in the 1998 election and in subsequent elections to the National Assembly, allowing Chávez to designate loyalists in the key positions of the Venezuelan state.

Regardless president Chávez's claim that Venezuela has made a transition from a representative democracy to a deliberative democracy, the case is that most important legislation has been passed through presidential decrees. This has been the case even though from the very beginning of his administration the president's governing coalition has controlled the National Assembly. Corrales brings forth the point that during 2001 Chávez passed thirty-nine decrees dealing with the most varied issues. Afterward, in 2006 the National Assembly gave Chávez special powers to legislate by decree for a period of 18 months (Corrales, 2005). During the 18 months the law was in force, President Chávez issued a total of 66 decrees. Moreover, the far reaching constitutional changes presented to the electorate by president Chávez in the constitutional referendum of December, 2007 were not put up for discussion by

his own partisans and followers, much less confronted with the views laid down by the opposition. According to Corrales (2009: 78) the proposal to reform the 1999 constitution was “drafted in secrecy by a small group of the president’s advisers whose names were not disclosed”. President Chávez transformed the referendum into a plebiscite, and lost. He was forced to promote a new constitutional referendum in 2009 regarding the sole issue of indefinite re-election to keep alive his aspiration to run for president in 2012 and thereafter. A first-class example of Chavez’s regime abuse of power is provided by the many obstacles the National Elections Board (controlled by Chávez’s loyalists) interposed in way of the citizen initiated recall referendum of 2004. The Board was able to postpone the implementation of this constitutional figure for a full year until the polls showed an increased level of popularity for the president (a full account of these events in Kornblith, 2005). Yet, as we will see later, Chávez’s government has encouraged and supported the creation of a number of grass-roots social organizations.

Uncivil movements, says Payne (2000), are not guided by a stable program, the leader is the program; and thus, the movement tends to be constantly changing as a result of the personal adaptations to the circumstances that surround him. This feature of uncivil movements shows markedly in the lack of doctrinal clarity that characterizes the discourse of the Bolivarian revolution. When campaigning for the presidency in 1997, Norden (1996: 129) states, Chávez employed ‘a rather vague discourse, often characterized by inconsistencies’. Ronald and Danopoulos (2003: 67) note that Chávez’s campaign message was ‘one part of revolution, one part of reform, and one part of populism.’ The lack of a clear message continued after Chávez became president. At the beginning of his mandate, Chávez spoke of the need for a Bolivarian revolution. Following the ideas of N. Ceresole, principal advisor to Chávez during the indicated period, the revolution should aim to build a ‘leader-army-people’ party for the realization of great historical feats; patriotism and self-sacrifice were to be core values of the new revolution. Afterward in 2002, Chávez argued that his movement was

inspired by the British Third Way. Then, in 2004 Chávez's focus shifted to the doctrine of endogenous development³. Since 2006, however, a new slogan came into being: XXI Century Socialism. The concrete political content of this newer doctrine is revealed in the proposed reform to the 1999 constitution, which included features such as a return to centralized authority (a measure that strikes at the heart of deliberative democracy), a presidential term of seven years from six, an increased number of signatures to activate a recall referendum, among others (De Venanzi, 2006). In April 2009 the National Assembly passed the *Regimen del Distrito Capital*, a law that allows the president to appoint a 'chief' with the power to oversee and control the performance of the democratically elected mayor of the Capital District (El Nacional, 3 April 2009).

The diffuse character of the ideas driving the Bolivarian revolution explains why many supporters and opponents of Chávez simply call his movement Chavismo. Nevertheless, there are certain continuities along this political process. Shifter (2006) contends, for instance, that the essence of Chavismo relies in the charismatic qualities of Chávez, and in the continuous political mobilization of the marginalized around some indeterminate ideal of participatory democracy. Although arguing from a more sympathetic stance to the Bolivarian revolution, Ellner (2002) has highlighted president Chávez's populist style, too. In his view, this style revealed itself in the strong anti-party discourse Chávez employed during the electoral campaign of 1998 and thereafter. His speeches contain fierce attacks on traditional political institutions while at the same time calling for direct citizen participation in the form of referenda and popular assemblies. In his discourse Chávez refers to his humble roots, his Indian and black features, and to his outsider status - successfully establishing a strong identification between himself and the vast sectors of Venezuela's marginalized. Overall, presi-

³ Endogenous development seeks the satisfaction of basic needs, the participation of the community, the protection of the environment, and the localization of the community in a determined space. See Ministerio de Información y Comunicación (2004).

dent Chávez represents the figure of a classic populist; Hawkins (2003) notes, for instance, that in Chávez's discourse we find an overemphasis upon the notion of the popular sovereignty and a strong socially divisive rhetoric. As to the practice of populism, we find a concern for mobilizing large numbers of the marginalized, government-funded grass-roots organizations, and the institution of civil groups with the intent of intimidating adversaries. In contrast to neo-populists such as Menem or Fujimori, president Chávez exploits a radical nationalist ideology and rejects market economics in favor of state interventionism and the reliance on price controls and subsidies. There is, nevertheless, a novel aspect in Chávez's populism: the denunciation of the values associated with modernity and modernization; indeed, his vision of Venezuela's future is caught up in the traditional values of the country's province (Cedeño, 2006).

Authoritarianism is inherently in tension with the rule of law and institutional state building. Casey (2005) has illustrated the workings of state violence under Chávez's regime: between 1999 and 2003, fifty-five Venezuelans had died in instances of street violence mostly in anti-government demonstrations that were violently attacked by Chávez's supporters. In Hawkins's (2003: 1140) view, Chávez's Manichaeian discourse of the people versus the elite has encouraged an attitude of anything goes among the president's supporters. After all, 'if the leader embodies the popular will, the opposition must be corrupt and illegitimate, and any means including violence can be legitimately employed against them.' Casey (2005) argues that the Venezuelan police and National Guard use excessive force against Chávez demonstrators and that detained protesters are ill treated and tortured. The same concern has been voiced by the Foro por la Vida (2009), an association comprising 14 human rights NGOs, which has complained about the excesses of public authorities in the control of anti-government peaceful demonstrations.

The most comprehensive account of the worsening of human and political rights during the Chávez decade is that compiled in

September 2008 by Human Rights Watch (2008). The Report points to a series of governmental practices that amount to abuses of power including blacklisting, attacks on the freedom of the press, violation of organized labor laws, lack of division of powers, court-packing, violation of international treaties on human rights, and many other practices that denote a great measure of political intolerance against opponents. HRW (2008) has also expressed its concern regarding cases of extrajudicial killings by security agents, which remain a frequent occurrence in Venezuela. Between January 2000 and February 2007 the attorney general's office registered 6,068 alleged killings by the police and National Guard, and impunity remains the norm. For its part, Amnesty International (2009) indicates that in Venezuela government officials are undermining human rights by making unfounded accusations against human rights organizations. Another issue of concern for Amnesty International is the wide-spread attacks on independent journalists and media outlets.

It must be added that the president has used the provisions regarding direct democracy included in the 1999 constitution as a tool to bypass the discussion of potentially conflictive legislation, and to impose plebiscitary conceptions of governance (Kornblith, 2005; Breuer, 2008). The easiness with which president Chávez set in motion the government initiated 2007 and 2009 referenda stands in stark contrast with the many obstacles the National Election Board interposed in the way of the citizen initiated collect referendum of 2004.

Uncivil leadership sets itself up as the voice of social groups excluded from the political or economic system, for which it constructs a new identity generally rooted in historical and traditional values (Payne, 2000). It appeals to the epic achievements of indigenous heroic figures to justify its fight against the alleged forces of evil. To be sure, Chávez's discourse overflows with references to the great undertakings of the heroes of the war for independence. The exploits of Simón Bolívar, The Liberator, play a crucial

role in the way Chávez perceives the nature of the task before him. The president is also fond of employing autochthonous Indian names to designate some of his campaigns and undertakings. Zuquete (2008: 91) has suggested that Chavez's recourse to name his policies after historical figures works to reinforce the connection of the masses with a mythical past. Also, the president's political style represents a form of missionary politics 'that should be understood as a form of political religion characterized by a dynamic relationship between a charismatic leader and a moral community that is invested with a mission of salvation against conspiratorial enemies'. The mission consists of a world-wide struggle against global capitalism and rampant materialism.

To many of his followers Chávez represents a charismatic and messianic figure. More generally, the political qualities of charisma become explicit in the form of a strong leader who attempts to restore a unitary representation of the world, against the diverse and complex variety of social representations and the feelings of risk and uncertainty that life acquires under global modernization (Lash et al., 1997; Beck, 2002). This historical re-elaboration comprises a fundamental counter-modernization narrative that works to revive feelings of communal and personal security⁴. Such a discourse guarantees the unconditional support to the movement from those groups who harbor feelings of disenchantment with modernization, who feel nostalgia for the predominance of a fractured pre-modern archetype, and who demand the return of a heroic sense in the conception of the nation's history, a sense that president Chávez masterfully introduces in his political speeches. Rangel and Vil-

⁴ Beck (2002: 210) says of individuals and societies forced to enter second modernity: 'Individualization does not automatically mean that people want to live as individuals and relate to one another as individuals. It could mean a new form of reflexive fundamentalism as well, which attempts to redefine collective identities... There will be resistance in the second modernity to individualization and to the way globalisation deterritorialises national cultures. It will come in particular from religious movements, the revival of ethnicities, and counter-modern movements, paradoxically using the information technology of the second modernity to organize themselves globally'.

Iaroel's (2007) study shows that Chavez's sympathizers tend to see him as having special and extraordinary qualities; that his actions transpire a mythical and heroic dimension; and that his main concern is with the wellbeing of the poor.

In opposition to the traditional modernization creed, which in Latin America produced societies marked by extremes of wealth and destitution (see Mires, 2000), president Chávez proposes to build a unified social order of a strong personal nature. This includes a pristine and nostalgic vision of the Venezuelan rural order, from which he personally comes (Cedeño, 2006). In Zuquete's (2008: 113) view, Chávez's discourse offers the marginalized a holistic and messianic view of the world, a discourse that 'claims to have the answers for ultimate questions and aims to shape and purify the collective consciousness.' The messianic worldview expresses 'in the apocalyptic tone in Chávez's discourse' and in his conviction that Venezuela represents 'the possibility of both renewal and the creation of a new era.' Chávez's discourse assumes the form of televised conversations where the president narrates historical anecdotes, provides alternate interpretations of crucial events in Venezuela's history, and sings popular songs. In doing so, the president brings to the fore the folk elements of Venezuela's culture. Not surprisingly, in the constitutional referenda of 2007 and 2009, support for the president was exceptionally high in rural areas and smaller urban centers where the traditional way of life is most ingrained (Corrales, 2009).

THE WELFARE FACE OF THE BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION

Undoubtedly closing the gap between those who live in social exclusion and those who enjoy civic rights represents the greatest challenge for all developing societies. It is a complex task that goes beyond improving the economic revenue of the poor and hopes to integrate the population into the social, economic, and political systems that give access to true citizenship. In opposition to these principles, populist leadership implies a mode of linkage between

voters and politicians defined by an exchange of goods, usually votes for selective incentives although in some cases when charisma is exceptional the exchange can adopt a second modality defined by an exchange of votes for some vague and utopian programs (Hawkins, 2003).

In Venezuela the exploitation of a radical populist discourse by president Chávez, in conjunction with massive social spending, the largest in Latin America to date, have won him the support of large segments of society (Penfold-Becerra, 2007). From a doctrinal point of view the social programs developed and implemented by the government were supposed to follow a set of valuable principles contained in the new 1999 constitution, regarding popular deliberation and the attainment of equal rights (Maingon, 2004). The social question in the 1999 Constitution is delineated along three basic principles: first, the search for equality, social solidarity, and social wellbeing; second, the construction of citizenship where social rights are universal, and third, the rescue of public space as the site upon which to build participatory democracy (Title I, articles one, two, and three). Chapters V and VI of the Constitution guarantee public health and education for all, the public provision for the care of the elderly and the disabled, public access to housing, public access to family planning, public provision of social security, full employment, a dignified minimum wage for all workers, the defense of cultural rights, and the right to leisure and participation in sports. It is worth noting that education and health appear as Human Rights in the new Constitution (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2001).

As it was previously stated, the Chávez government has facilitated some forms of grass-root social participation. Among these new forms we can recognize neighborhood organizations that work on civic programs (Ronald and Danopoulos, 2003). Available information (UCAB, 2007) reveals that these new deliberative spaces have had some success in mobilizing the poor in seeking solutions

for some of their basic needs. In addition, fifty-five per cent of Venezuelans think that Chávez's government has procured an increase in the number of grass-root organizations committed to the promotion of social welfare. Lower social strata (D and E) report that most of their social participation takes place within governmental organizations. Only a minority of people belonging to these strata (14 per cent) reported participating in independent organizations. Participation in organizations which define themselves as being pro-government is strong, accounting for 35 per cent of all social involvement; organizations defining themselves as independent capture 20 per cent of total participation, whereas NGOs that see themselves as playing an oppositional role capture 16 per cent. There is, however, a strong belief in 60 per cent of the sample that only those organizations directly associated to and funded by the government can succeed in bringing welfare to the population.

Despite these efforts and of the participatory spirit that flows through the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution, most attempts of president Chávez's government to produce social programs have ended in a collection of assistance programs of a highly centralized nature (Alvarado, 2003). President Chávez launched the first wave of social programs in 1999 under the name *Plan Bolívar 2000*. These plans aimed at feeding the poor. They engaged the Armed Forces in what became an unregulated and disorganized effort to distribute food and the benefit of ambulatory dental services, all centralized in the Fondo Único Social. Alvarado maintains that this Plan was incoherently designed and became seriously discredited as a result of accusations of corruption and embezzlement. These facts, added to the government's inability to fight poverty and the growing rate of unemployment, plunged the popularity of president Chávez to 23 per cent in 2003. Nevertheless, his popularity increased in 2004 as a result of the implementation of a new set of social policies called *misiones* (Kornblith, 2005).

Following is an analysis of the performance of the Chávez regime in the area of welfare policy. It includes a look at Venezuelan

public spending, and an assessment of the results of the most important missions.

One way of ascertaining a government's commitment to fighting poverty consists in looking at its levels of social spending. Chart 1 below shows the social spending incurred by successive Venezuelan governments as a percentage of GDP since 1992.

Chart 1. Venezuela. Social Spending as Percentage of GDP (1993-2006)

Year	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
%	20.8	23.1	21.2	22.6	25.4	23.6	24.5	29.5	31.5	28.3	31.0	28.4	28.5	30.97

Source: Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Planificación y el Desarrollo (2008). Sectors included in the calculations are education, health, culture, science, housing, social security, culture-communication, and science and technology.

Chart one show that Venezuelan social spending has experienced an increase from 20.85 per cent in 1993, to 30.97 per cent in 2006. Most of the spending has been directed to the fields of education, social security, health, housing, social development, culture and communication, and finally, science and technology. Hence we can conclude that Chávez's government has destined an increasing amount of funds to deal with the country's social problems.

In the educational field, the most publicized program has been Misión Robinson; it aims at reducing the illiteracy rate. To this end it enrolled 128,967 facilitators to attend the needs of 1,536,119 beneficiaries (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Planificación y el Desarrollo, 2008). The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2006) reports a slight decrease in the Venezuelan illiteracy rate between 2000 and 2005 from 7.5 per cent to 6 per cent respectively.

Another effort in the field of education has been Misión Ribas. Since its inception in 2003, the mission has provided high-school level classes to about five million Venezuelans who, due to different reasons, were forced to drop out of the educational system. In 2007 the mission enrolled 608,326 students, graduating 168,253 of them (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Energía y el Petróleo, 2008).

The flagship of the government's social programs is Misión Barrio Adentro. This Misión provides medical attention to the poorest population in underserved regions of the country, mostly by Cuban doctors. According to official sources, Barrio Adentro employs 15,449 doctors and has offered some 216,445,701 medical consultations up to December 2006. Services are provided 24 hours a day for emergencies and are free of charge (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Planificación y el Desarrollo, 2008). UNICEF has declared that mission Barrio Adentro shows a great deal of potential as a model for comprehensive primary health care (UNICEF, 2005). Based on their ethnographic study of a sample of modules, Briggs and Briggs (2009: 549) have stated that Barrio Adentro has 'emerged from creative interactions between policy makers, clinicians, community workers, and residents, adopting flexible, problem-solving strategies.' According to government sources infant mortality fell from 20.7 per thousand live births in the 1995-2000 period to 15.50 per thousand live births in 2005 (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Planificación y el Desarrollo, 2008). However, CEPAL (2006) indicates only a discrete improvement in some of the country's social and demographic indicators. In its analysis, the infant mortality rate fell to 19 per thousand live births in 2000-2005 whereas the life expectancy at birth increased from 72.2 years in the period 1995-2000 to 72.8 years in the period 2000-2005, and is expected to continue to increase in the period 2005-2010 to 73.8 years. Nonetheless, Jones (2008) has pointed to the notable erosion of the program: in his analysis, many of the health modules are functioning below capacity while numerous others have closed down. A significant number of Cuban doctors have fled the country,

whereas the government's spending on *Barrio Adentro* has worked to the detriment of the proper functioning of public hospitals.

The government has also implemented Misión Mercal. The aim of this mission is to sell food at discounted prices in the poorer areas of the country. In order to do this, Misión Mercal has developed an infrastructure consisting of 30 markets, 12,213 mini-markets, and 261 mobile points of distribution, which according to official sources, reaches nearly 40 per cent of the Venezuelan population (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Planificación y el Desarrollo, 2006).

According to the Venezuelan National Statistics Institute (INE, 2005) the country's poverty level increased from 48.1 per cent in 2000, to 61 per cent in 2003 and 2004⁵. President Chávez blamed the oil strike of 2003 for such an increase and asked the INE for the application of a new method of measuring poverty. In response, the INE began to measure poverty by way of a very complex method using indicators such as revenue, access to health care, vulnerability to environmental risks, access to education, and social and civic rights transfers (INE, 2006). Yet, the INE has never explained how to actually estimate the poverty rate using these kind of data. By applying the new methodology the INE reported that between 2004 and 2005 poverty had decreased a total of fourteen points.

According to CEPAL (2007) the recent trend in poverty reduction in Latin America is mostly associated with the high levels of economic growth experienced in the region since 2004, alongside the implementation of large-scale social programs, and Venezuela is not the exception. In 2006 the areas' GDP reached 5 per cent with Venezuela topping the bill with a GDP of 9.5 per cent.

⁵ It is interesting to note that in the newer electronic bulletins the INE (2008) has changed this figure to 47 per cent for 2004.

Regardless the benefits that the missions have brought to the poor, they tend to show important shortcomings. Maingon (2004) has argued that the regime's social policies appear to be disjointed appendages of the central government, not constitutional and state policies of a permanent character. Moreover, the administration of these policies is opaque and strongly coupled to political affinities. Penfold-Becerra (2007: 65) writes in relation to this issue that the "missions were financed through opaque and non-budgetary mechanisms; namely by transferring oil revenues directly from PDVSA to a special fund managed by the presidency. According to PDVSA's financial statements, in 2004 the fund managed more than \$ 5 billion, close to four per cent of the GDP." What we are witnessing, in Maingon's (2004) and Corrales' (2009) analyses, is the construction of a parallel institutional apparatus of a civic-military character. This is an authoritarian and centralist framework that openly contradicts the participatory premises contained in the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution.

THE TWO FACES THESIS: IMPLICATIONS FOR VENEZUELAN POLITICAL POLARIZATION

The better known accounts concerning the nature of the Bolivarian revolution and the intimately connected theme of the political polarization following its inception are those of Gott (2000), Corrales (2005), Cedeño (2006), Cannon (2008), and Heath (2009). Gott describes the Chávez regime as one driven by a radical nationalist doctrine very much opposed to globalization and the Washington consensus. In Gott's view, Chávez represents the voice of the silent and oppressed majority, and understands Venezuelan polarization as the result of the confrontation between the destitute masses and the oligarchy, mostly the Venezuelan elite and the upper-middle classes. Now, there is undoubtedly a strong class component in the political polarization existing in Venezuela.

Chart 2. Support for President Chávez by Social Strata 2007

<i>Social Strata</i>	<i>% Support for president Chavez</i>
A	15.8
B	21.1
C	30.8
D	30.5
E	43.6

Source: UCAB (2007).

As can be seen in Chart 2 support for president Chávez increases as we go down the class structure. Yet to assume that Chávez's opposition is mostly recruited from the elites and the upper-middle classes who are fighting to preserve free-market policies, and to capture the state's oil revenue is to misrepresent the conflict in question⁶. The fact is that in all of the presidential elections and referenda taking place since 1998, the opposition has obtained in between 39 and 52 per cent of the total ballot (Consejo Nacional Electoral, 2006). In Venezuela, as in most developing nations, the elites and the upper-middle classes combined represent a very small percentage of the total population, only 12 per cent in the case of Venezuela according to Ugalde et al. (2004). This signifies that a substantial number of non-elite people, and even some segments among the poor, as Chart two demonstrates oppose president Chávez. In a recent study Lupu (2009) has provided statistical evidence showing that in recent elections support for Chávez is increasing among segments of the lower middle-class, not from the very poor. Thus, Gott's traditional class-conflict approach to Venezuelan polarization should be avoided in favor of an approach that is open to consider the existence of a complex cluster of variables working to produce the country's elevated degree of political conflict. For instance, in a more sophisticated version of the conflict approach, Cannon (2008) has argued that race represents an im-

⁶ Only a small segment of the Venezuelan business class supports free-market policies. See (Ugalde et al., 2004).

portant issue in the support for Chávez. A second contribution stemming from conflict theory is that offered by Heath (2009), who argues that much of the class element at play in Venezuelan politics under Chávez is the result of the president's own class driven discourse and that 'there is little evidence to support the idea that there had been any translation of class conditions into a sense of class self-awareness prior to the emergence of Chávez'.

Corrales (2005) has provided a compounded explanation for the high level of polarization existing in Venezuela. He argues that state intervention in the economy under Chávez is not only rejected by some powerful economic associations, but also by some low-income groups. In his view many of Chávez's supporters simply expected him to protect them from the more troublesome effects of the neo-liberal reforms implemented by president C. A. Pérez; nonetheless, Corrales argues that president Chávez's 'heavy-handed' methods alienated a significant number of his supporters. A second cause explaining polarization, according to Corrales, was the move by president Chávez to put in place a number of mechanisms to help him remain in power. This produced a strong confrontation between those who claim that the president's actions are justified in bringing about social democracy, and those who think Chávez spends all of his time devising newer and more effective ways to construct a dictatorship.

Finally, Cedeño (2006: 97) argues that Venezuelan polarization is inextricably related to conflicting views concerning modernization. For the elites and the middle-classes, modernization is about overcoming anachronistic economic formations and archaic cultural imaginaries, yet for president Chávez and many of his followers, global modernization is associated with social marginalization and loss of national sovereignty. Cedeño argues that in Venezuela there is a process of recomposing the concept of the modern, which legitimizes the installment of radical forms of populism. Hence, the Bolivarian revolution 'annuls the socio-temporal diver-

sity of Venezuelans their heterogeneous logics, the different ways they experience and conceptualize the country's history'.

The present article makes the case for the inclusion of another variable into the analysis of Venezuelan political polarization: the existence of profound differences regarding the meanings Venezuelans attach to democracy. Charts three, four, and five are offered in support of this argument. Chart three shows the way Venezuelans perceive the quality of the country's democracy under Chávez.

Chart 3⁷. Venezuela 2008 perceptions on the quality of Venezuelan democracy

<i>Positive perceptions</i>	<i>Negative perceptions</i>
Forty-nine per cent of a sample positively values the workings of Venezuelan democracy. Highest score for Latin America in 2008. Level reached 59% in 2007, second highest in Latin America (Latinobarómetro, 2008)	Sixty-two per cent of a sample report that Venezuelans are not equal before the Law (Latino-barómetro, 2008)
Eighty-two per cent of a sample report that democracy is the best form of government (Latinobarómetro, 2008)	Seventy per cent of a sample criticize the performance of the ombudsman (Datanálisis, 2005)
	Seventy-six per cent of a sample report that public institutions do not work efficiently (Latino-barómetro, 2008)
	Fifty-four per cent of a sample report that Judges can be bribed (Latinobarómetro, 2008). This is the highest score for the 18 Latin American countries included in the Latinobarómetro study
	Eighty per cent of a sample report that government does not do enough to fight corruption (Datanálisis, 2008)

Chart three reveals the existence of a notable contradiction in the way democracy is perceived among Venezuelans, whereby democracy is highly rated (especially in 2007) despite the fact that important aspects of the democratic process, such as the rule of law, control of corruption, and government effectiveness, are poorly

⁷ Methodological note 1: It was impossible to present longitudinal data for the selected indicators. Latinobarómetro and Datanálisis both tend to vary the questions included in their surveys.

evaluated. This issue is highly significant for Venezuela shows the highest popular support for democracy in Latin America for 2008.

Chart four introduces social class into the analysis. By doing this we can start to realize the complexities involved in the contradiction annotated above. It must be noted that the Latinobarómetro survey does not stratify its sample by class. Additionally, neither Datanálisis nor UCAB include in their surveys direct questions regarding perceptions about the quality of democracy. Hence, the approach to this issue will necessarily proceed by relying upon statistical figures that tender indirect evidence for the relationship between social class and perceptions on the quality of democracy.

Chart 4. Venezuela 2005⁸ Support for Government, National Assembly, Supreme Court, and the Ombudsman, by Social Strata

<i>Social strata</i>	<i>Support for government %</i>	<i>Performance of the National Assembly % Persons responding Very Bad, Bad, Regular to bad</i>	<i>Performance of the Supreme Court % Persons responding Very Bad, Bad, Regular to Bad</i>	<i>Performance of the Ombudsman % Persons responding Very Bad, Bad, Regular to Bad</i>
A & B	10	45	58	48
C	24.5	30	31	24.4
D	45	27	31	18
E	55.9	20	22.1	9.1

⁸ Methodological note 2: The year 2005 was selected because it is the only year for which Datanálisis collected data on perceptions on the performance of the Government, the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, and the Ombudsman.

Source: Datanálisis. Omnibus surveys 2004-2008 (2008).

As Chart four reveals social class is positively correlated to both levels of support for the government and to perceptions regarding the quality of democracy. It is notable that the poorer strata tend to support the workings of present day Venezuelan democracy. Yet, Mainwaring and Scully (2008:123) have observed that 'good governance does not always generate popular support' and that 'governments that govern poorly are nevertheless sometimes able to capture the public's backing.' In their view Chávez provides a good example of a president who ranks low in regards democratic governance, and yet the poor consider him to be a democratic leader. These trends seem to lend support to our thesis that Chávez's followers are inclined to understand democracy as a system that guarantees access to basic goods and services. Yet, the UCAB (2007) poverty project has revealed that in Venezuela the poor also embrace voting as an important aspect of democracy.

Chart five explores the extent to which Venezuelans are satisfied with the provision of public goods and services.

Chart 5. Venezuela. Levels of satisfaction with the public provision of goods and services by total sample and by political affinity

<i>Levels of satisfaction with the public provision of goods and services</i>	<i>Total sample</i>	<i>President Chávez's supporters</i>
Education.	57.2 %	88.0 %
Persons responding "Satisfied" or "Very Satisfied" + "Satisfied"	(Datanálisis, 2008) 61.8 % (UCAB, 2007) 74 % (Latinobarómetro, 2007)	(Datanálisis, 2008)
Health.	52 %	86 %
Persons responding "Satisfied" or "Very Satisfied" + "Satisfied"	(Datanálisis, 2008) 64% (Latinobarómetro, 2007) 57 % (UCAB, 2007)	(Datanálisis, 2008)
Distribution of discounted food (Mission Mercal)	65 %	63.3 %
Persons responding "Satisfied" vs. "Unsatisfied"	(UCAB ,2007)	(Datanálisis, 2008)

Chart five reveals that a significant number of Venezuelans, especially those supporting president Chávez are satisfied with the public provision of basic goods and services. At this point in the analysis, I must return to the tradition versus modernity polemic introduced in previous sections of this article. In their comprehensive study of the relationship between culture and poverty, Ugalde et al. (2004) have argued that due to the rentier nature of the Venezuelan state, all social strata have retained a traditional component in their culture. Rather than producing citizens, they say, the political system has tended to produce clients who struggle to capture the oil revenues of the state.

Nevertheless, beyond this generalization, the argument follows, differences in values between poorer and richer strata can be recognized. Modern dispositions seem to be more embedded among the upper and the educated classes, whereas the poor seem to embrace more traditional values associated to paternalism and the need for affective relationships outside of the home. Additionally, 80 per cent of those holding traditional values reported that participation in political parties should be rewarded with 'political favors'; that personal life is the outcome of chance and providence not the result of one's own doing; and that the state should help the poor improve their socio-economic status.

The Latinobarómetro (2007) study has uncovered similar perceptions about the role of the state among Venezuelans. Indeed, Venezuela is the Latin American country with the highest percentage of population expressing the opinion that the state 'can solve all problems'. The percentage of people expressing this notion has increased during Chavez's years in office: from 46 per cent of the population in 1997 to 67 per cent in 2007. The political implication of these findings is that many individuals among the poor would be willing to support a political system characterized by populist practice and charismatic-messianic leadership. Hence, in Venezuela we find a very good match between peoples' expectations of government and governmental practice itself.

The figures offered in Charts three, four, and five allow for the following statements: (a) there is a notable divergence in the way Venezuelans understand the meaning and practice of democracy; (b) support for Venezuelan democracy under Chávez is highly stratified by social class: higher social strata are much more critical of the workings of Venezuelan democracy than lower social strata. Yet significant segments of the poor adverse the president; (c) lower social strata are remarkably satisfied with the public provision of services and goods, (d) the poorer strata, and to a lesser degree, the lower middle-class tends to support president Chávez's government, and (e) the poor and lower middle-classes tend to support

a range of institutions essential to democracy: the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, and the office of the Ombudsman.

Hence, we can tentatively conclude by stating the thesis that the distinct faces of the Bolivarian revolution, authoritarianism and welfare, as described in previous sections of this article are playing a crucial role in determining the course of political polarization in Venezuela. Yet, a more comprehensive understanding of this issue must take into account a complex cluster of factors such as Chávez's socially divisive discourse (Hawkins, 2003; Cannon, 2008; Heath, 2009), the intolerance of his regime towards political opponents and critics (HRW, 2008), and his anti-modern stance which works to produce a great deal of ontological relief among the poor but a great deal of frustration among the middle-classes' expectations for the future.

CONCLUSIONS

The present article started with the observation that the Bolivarian revolution exhibits two distinct faces: an authoritarian face and a welfare face. Then the article hypothesized that the high levels of political polarization existing in Venezuela under president Chávez are associated to whichever face of the Bolivarian revolution the observer/agent is willing to emphasize: critics of the president usually refer to his anti-democratic practices, whereas supporters praise his commitment to the plight of the poor. The article provided a detailed analysis of these two faces: on the one hand it provided evidence to support the claim that under Chávez, the Venezuelan political regime has moved to a dominant power system. Also, that such a shift toward authoritarianism was the result of the arrival of an uncivil movement to power. On the other hand, the investigation showed that the Chávez government has significantly increased social spending in areas such as education and health, and has implemented a number of social programs that, despite being well received by the poor, have failed to trans-

late into formalized institutional systems dedicated to the rational and non-partisan distribution of key services.

Finally, the article explored the issue of whether the agents engaged in the political process would echo such a duality in their perceptions of the quality of Venezuelan democracy. Relying upon statistical data produced by Venezuelan and international organizations, the article was able to provide evidence for the argument that under Chávez's presidency, we are witnessing a strong, and at times violent, confrontation between individuals and groups who hold two different conceptions of the meaning of democracy: higher social strata seem to be operating under a political and civil rights perspective of democracy, whereas lower strata appear to adhere to the notion of democratic practice as mostly characterized by access to basic goods and services as legitimate rights, and voting. In consonance with other studies our research found that there is a strong class component in the Venezuelan political process, yet our findings call for a more comprehensive approach to polarization that avoids economic reductionism and is prepared to include in the analysis other variables whose interconnection may better reveal the complexities inherent in the conflict.

The defeat of the constitutional reform initiative of 2007, a project championed by Chávez, should have signaled a new era for Venezuelan politics. The juncture offered a very good historical opportunity for the government to seek a national consensus around the notion of building a novel model of political and social democracy, one that would allow for the synthesis between two systems of aspiration –both legitimate and desirable– which have been irreconcilable until now: the aim to establish a mode of governance that respects civil rights and liberties, and the development of policies oriented toward reducing social exclusion and poverty. Notwithstanding, the president responded by passing many of the laws included in the 2007 project for constitutional change by decree, and by demanding the realization of a new constitutional referendum that would allow him to run indefinitely for office. As is well

known the president won this referendum with 54 per cent of the vote.

The confrontation between diverging views regarding the meaning and practice of democracy among Venezuelan social classes, in conjunction with Chávez's authoritarian style and his determination to keep passing controversial policies by decree, indicate that in all likelihood, polarization will continue to be the dominating feature of Venezuela's political system for a long time to come.

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